

The Professors Too?: Mental Health on College Campuses is Broader Than Just the Students

Everyone connected to America's college campuses – students, professors, administrators and staff – longed for an end to the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic this fall. The sights and sounds of students hustling to in-person classes, sharing stories in boisterous dining halls, huddling together in study groups, and sweating on intramural fields provide tangible evidence of a return to normalcy. Yet, despite these encouraging signs, a mental health crisis looms under the surface.

The topic of mental health has been in heavy circulation since the start of the pandemic. However, within academia, the mental health of students rather than professors has received more attention. Nonetheless, professors around the country are experiencing negative mental health effects due to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

“There is no question that trying to achieve both relationship and pedagogical goals during the pandemic has been a monumental challenge,” said Dr. Steven Lechner.

Lechner, a part-time professor sharing his time between two institutions, started teaching at North Carolina State and William Peace University during the Fall 2020 semester, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that time, he, like many adults, has experienced increased levels of anxiety and stress.

Statistics show that adults across the board are facing heightened mental health and substance abuse issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a June 2020 CDC study,

40.9% of respondents reported suffering “at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition” related to the pandemic.

Professors are not exempt from these problems. For instance, a study on professors at the University of Rhode Island found that “15.3% of participating faculty reported elevated symptoms of depression” and “19.5% reported higher levels of anxiety.”

However, statistics alone fail to fully capture the lived experiences of those on the frontline of education.

Jason Prentice, senior lecturer at Boston University, said, “it felt like, colloquially speaking, I was losing my mind teaching one zoom class after another at the end of last spring semester.”

Prentice and Lechner both described feeling as though they had to modify their approaches to teaching to meet students where they were during a global pandemic.

In Lechner’s case, witnessing students struggle through remote classes and a loss of community caused him to “think more deeply about the student experience.”

The empty classroom and zoom fatigue that plagued the last school year made it harder for professors to connect with their students. As Lechner observed, even when in-person classes resumed, physical distancing protocols, mask-wearing, increased student stress levels and chronic absences created a wall of separation between him and his students.

Professors teaching amidst a pandemic have also felt a heightened responsibility to accommodate their students, sometimes even having to serve in emotional support roles. A nationwide survey led by Sarah Ketchen Lipson, a Boston University mental health researcher, found that “nearly 80 percent of higher education faculty report dealing with student mental health issues—issues that more than 90 percent of faculty believe have worsened or significantly worsened during the pandemic.”

Prentice, who has taught at BU for over 15 years, said defeatedly, “I have had some students this past year who are in serious distress, more so than other times.”

He added that signs of emotional distress in some students were so severe that he felt compelled to refer them to the BU Dean of Students Office.

As a result of these observations, Prentice has emphasized the need to foster personal connections with new students and reestablish those relationships disrupted by the period of online learning.

But, disconnection not only permeates the student-professor bond, but also adversely affects a professor’s relationship with their academic colleagues and even with the institution more broadly.

Lechner’s experience is unique. He started teaching at two universities during the chaotic start of the pandemic. As a result, he missed out on opportunities to meet other faculty and had limited ways to become part of a wider university community. In fact, he met only three people other than his students during his first year teaching at William Peace University.

“I felt completely disconnected from the institution and the community that the school tauts,” said Lechner.

In addition to dealing with the problem of disconnectedness, professors report feeling overworked and overwhelmed due to fallout from the pandemic. This semester, they have had to deal with increased numbers of students returning to campus. Many of these students seem more unprepared and unfocused than ever before.

Research backs up these observations. According to a study by Hobsons and Hanover Research, 71% of students “are having trouble staying focused on their coursework,” 52% “are

struggling to complete coursework” and 40% “found it challenging to attend their classes.”

Struggling students place a heavier burden on professors.

“We can only hold the fort for so long,” said Dr. Nancy Smith-Hefner, Department Chair of BU’s Department of Anthropology.

Even with in-person classes resuming, professors are coping with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety. Therefore, their mental health should be a higher priority for college administrations. Instead, schools like Boston University, North Carolina State University, and William Peace University are failing to provide the necessary mental health resources for their faculty.

Lechner explained that occasional words of encouragement by administrators, apparently intended to acknowledge the prevalence of mental health issues among faculty and staff, felt performative.

In terms of BU’s response, Prentice expressed disappointment with administration since the start of the 2020-2021 school year. He believes that the bottom line has driven BU’s handling of the pandemic in most cases, rather than a genuine concern for the well-being of its employees.

While some universities are taking steps to provide resources for faculty, demands on their time limit the effectiveness of these measures. Professors, especially this semester, are struggling to balance their workload and personal lives, both impacted by the pandemic. Under these circumstances, accessing mental health resources and programs often feel like just another task.

“At what point are other resources actually just adding stress?” said Lechner.

There is a tendency for universities to hype their mental health programs. Some professors view this as disingenuous. They see the schools as part of the problem, not the cure. They point out how the pandemic has exposed systemic weaknesses that must be addressed.

Universities are expected to foster a healthy community for their faculty, staff and students. The pandemic has made these objectives harder to achieve than ever. So, where do universities go from here?

The answer could be to simply listen. For example, Prentice is encouraged by the increased emphasis on openness throughout the BU community, including on mental health issues. Time will tell if this trend of transparency continues.

Regardless, one thing is true: universities' community members will not forget how their universities responded or failed to respond to their needs during the pandemic.

“If the pandemic ended tomorrow, I don't think it could be forgotten,” said Lechner.